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150817Z Mar 05

UNCLAS COLOMBO 000534

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DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS AND G/IWI FOR KHADIAGALA
NSC FOR DORMANDY

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: CHILD MARRIAGE NOT COMMON

REF: STATE 36341

1. (U) Summary. Child marriage is not a significant problem in Sri Lanka. Under civil law, the legal age of marriage in Sri Lanka is 18 years old with no provision for marriage at an earlier age with parental consent. While Muslims follow their own cultural law and may marry at an earlier age, most marry after age 18. One mission interlocutor commented that although the incidence of child marriage is low, some early marriages occur in the impoverished, rural Muslim community in the Eastern Province and in the poor tea-estate Tamil community in central Sri Lanka. There is not a U.S. Government-funded program in place to combat the limited incidence of child marriage in Sri Lanka. End Summary.

Child Marriage Illegal Since 1995

2. Until 1995, child marriage was legal (and more common) in Sri Lanka. In 1995, the Government amended the penal code to prevent child marriage with the goal of enhancing protection to women and children vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse, according to Lawyers for Human Rights and Development (LHRD), a non-governmental organization (NGO) working on child abuse issues. Under current civil law, the legal age of marriage for men and women in Sri Lanka is 18 years-old; there is no provision for marriage at an earlier age with parental consent.

3. (U) Muslim and indigenous Veddah communities, however, follow their own cultural laws, and boys and girls may marry at an earlier age. According to adolescent and reproductive health NGO "Policy," only 9 percent of Muslim women marry at an age younger than 20. There are no reliable marriage statistics for the very small Veddah community.

Child Marriage Not Common

4. (U) While statistics about child marriage are unavailable, Mission interlocutors agree that the practice is not a significant problem in Sri Lanka. Harendra de Silva, Director of the National Child Protection Authority, told poloff that the average age of marriage in Sri Lanka is 26 years old for women and almost 29 years old for men. De Silva commented that although the incidence of child marriage is low, some early marriages occur in the impoverished, rural Muslim community in the Eastern Province and in the poor tea-estate Tamil community. Most Muslim women, he added, marry after the age of 18. Tahirih Qurratulayn, a Child Protection Policy Officer at Save the Children, told poloff that in some cases, children (from all communities) who are sexually abused are given to their abusers in marriage to lessen the stigma of the abuse. Qurratulayn noted that this practice is more common in poor, rural areas and leads to more incidents of maternal and infant mortality. LHRD reported that police in many areas advise parents of statutory rape victims to give their daughters in marriage to the perpetrator.

5. (U) There is no U.S. Government-funded program in place to combat the limited incidence of child marriage in Sri Lanka.

LUNSTEAD